



General Assembly

Seventy-second session

117th plenary meeting
Monday, 17 September 2018, 3 p.m.
New York

Official Records

President: Mr. Lajčák (Slovakia)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Statement by the Secretary-General

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Secretary-General António Guterres.

The Secretary-General: I congratulate my very dear friend, His Excellency Mr. Miroslav Lajčák, and all representatives on the successful completion of a very productive session. The general debate in September was the first in more than a decade at which all Member States spoke. That was a sign of welcome engagement by political leaders at the highest level and of faith in the value of this unique and universal organ. The seventy-second session has been busy and active in addressing issues ranging from climate change and intolerance to disarmament and economic and social development. The General Assembly has demonstrated yet again its invaluable role as a forum for addressing the full spectrum of the world's concerns and aspirations.

The seventy-second session has also been notable for the wide-ranging efforts undertaken by Member States to strengthen the United Nations itself. The General Assembly took the decision to shift the Organization's management paradigm and restructured the peace and security pillar. Most significantly, the Assembly adopted a far-reaching resolution aimed at repositioning the United Nations development system (resolution 72/279). That ushered in the most ambitious transformation in decades of the United Nations support of social and economic progress. These changes and reforms, once fully implemented, will make our

Organization more effective and efficient in pursuing peace and in helping Member States to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Through this work, the President of the General Assembly, Miroslav Lajčák, showed great skill in guiding this organ. He possesses deep knowledge across the international agenda and has always been strongly committed to cooperation as a critical ingredient in success, and so he took a wide range of steps to bring people together and new partners into the Assembly's work. He has always been a warm, accessible and friendly presence — a welcome complement to the difficult work that we do.

In another signature step of the seventy-second session, the Assembly has continued to move towards greater transparency by holding, for the first time ever, an informal dialogue with candidates for the position of the President. I look forward to working closely with President-elect Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés of Ecuador, who is the fourth woman to serve in this capacity. The Assembly is our indispensable forum. I thank all involved in the successes of the seventy-second session for their commitment and hard work, and for setting the stage for further gains as the seventy-third session begins tomorrow.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

I will now deliver my closing statement.

This will be my final speech to the General Assembly and I want to use it to reflect on the year

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we have had; however, I will avoid listing achievements or events. My team has produced a hand-over report that contains this information and is available on our website. Instead, I will try to give my own political assessment of what I have seen and heard as President of the General Assembly, and in doing so I will highlight six major trends I have identified. My humble hope is that this contribution can inspire more dialogue about these issues in the future.

The first trend is about peace, and on this the Charter of the United Nations is very strong. It commits us to saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war. But we have not always met this commitment; in the past we were too reactive. While we had excellent peacekeepers and mediators, the problem was that by the time they got there it was often too late. Essentially, we were trying to keep peace when there was no peace left to keep, and we were leaving too soon, before the roots of conflict had been pulled fully from the ground. We have, however, recognized that, and in 2016 the General Assembly and Security Council adopted the groundbreaking resolutions 70/262 and 2282 (2016), respectively, which outlined a new approach called "sustaining peace" and turned our focus to preventive action.

Then, at this seventy-second session, we brought sustaining peace to the attention of world leaders. In April, we held a first-ever high-level meeting on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and we heard a powerful response from the heads of the delegations. They put their weight behind this new concept and brought best practices and new ideas to the table. The entire General Assembly was instrumental in bringing this about. I therefore think we can say that we have all brought greater visibility and prominence to this new approach to peace. But we have a lot of work ahead. Sustaining peace cannot be just a concept or an aspiration; rather, it should be seen more like an operations manual — something that guides the real work we do on the ground every day.

The second trend I want to highlight today is about our planet. I think most of us have realized something — it is crunch time. At the previous general debate, climate change was the most frequently referenced item on the agenda. In fact, 85 per cent of Heads of State and delegations spoke about it, and I predict that we will see similar trends next week. When it comes to the environment, a lot has happened over the past year. We have seen the Paris Agreement on Climate

Change make headlines; we have seen hurricanes in the Caribbean; and we have seen flooding and drought hit communities around the world, from Africa to Asia. Indeed, the climate is changing; the planet is reacting to what we are doing and the need for action is very real. I have heard more and more members of the General Assembly reflect that in their speeches here at the United Nations.

Alongside that, our approach to sustainable development is evolving. We have gone from making broad calls for future action to outlining the tangible steps that we are or should be taking right now. To date, over 100 countries have volunteered to share their work in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Next summer, we will have the first major review of all of our efforts at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

While there is good news, there is also another side to the story. The fact is that we still live in an unequal world. The big agreements are usually reached in halls like this one by people like us, but the real need for them is out there. That need is driven by people living in poverty; the people feeling the real impact of climate change; the people looking to the future with only worry or fear. That is why people like us in here need to keep the promises we made to the people out there.

But we cannot do any of that without the funding. As it stands, we are on track to achieve neither the Sustainable Development Goals nor the goals of the Paris Agreement. We must do more to mobilize financing. We need new partnerships, in particular with the private sector, but they will come only through sustained outreach and dialogue. The window of opportunity will not stay open forever and we need to wake up before it closes.

Now I will turn to a third trend I have seen, which is the growing ability of the General Assembly to adapt to major global shifts. In 2015 and 2016, some newspapers and politicians, particularly in my part of the world, were talking about the migration crisis. To others, especially our brothers and sisters in Africa, migration had been a fact of life for a long time. But all of us agreed on one thing — we could not continue with business as usual. And so, we turned to the United Nations and its General Assembly.

We had many discussions about the challenges of irregular migration, as well as the opportunities that come when it is safe, orderly and regular, and we

decided to finally develop a global framework. This summer, we arrived at the final document. It took a lot of work and even more will come after it is adopted at the world's first Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, to be held in Morocco in December. I think that this shows that our international machinery, with the Assembly as its engine room, can adapt and react. It is a source of solutions for almost any issue on the global agenda. Also, with 193 members and observers, the General Assembly has enormous legitimacy, and given its flexible agenda, the Assembly can play the role of a global thought leader.

But the fact is we have never seen a rate of change like this one. It is growing faster than ever and the General Assembly cannot get left behind. As the world's most representative body, it must stay ahead of the curve, or at least be quick to follow it, and that is particularly important as issues like artificial intelligence, data protection and the future of work take up more space in our daily lives. But the Assembly cannot do this from inside a bubble. It will need to hear from the people on the ground — from scientists, academics and technicians to parliamentarians, journalists and young people. These are the people who are out there seeing changes happen in real time. They must be able to tell their stories and give their opinions in halls like this one, or else we will be left playing catch-up while other actors drive the discourse.

A fourth trend I want to speak about today is reform. The United Nations must evolve; the United Nations must adapt; the United Nations must be equipped for the world around it. These were the kinds of phrases that we heard at last year's general debate. During the seventy-second session, the Secretary-General released reform proposals in three areas: peace and security, management and development. The General Assembly has since then decided to advance all three, and this is a step forward. There is no doubt about it.

But I want to use my platform today to highlight a potential challenge. We can all say that we want to reform and we can even adopt resolutions to support each reform process. But these actions alone cannot produce results. We also need funding, and that, I think, is another trend. Overall, there is a growing appetite for reform and innovation. We have raised our expectations, but we do not always have the budget to go with them. So I believe this issue is in need of further discussion, but I cannot talk about the reform proposals

without acknowledging the Secretary-General. It has been a pleasure to work with him this year. I know how much his leadership is needed and appreciated in these trying times, and I am confident that this house will back his efforts to secure the central role of our United Nations in a changing world.

Now, I want to talk about reform within the General Assembly itself. The revitalization process has continued this year, and so have its results. We saw some of them in action last June, with the election of my successor. For the first time, it happened through a system of interactive dialogues with Member States, and I hope that this revitalization process will continue. I want to use this opportunity to once again congratulate the President-elect, Her Excellency/Ms. Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, and wish her luck for the session ahead.

However, we cannot talk about the trend of reform without mentioning the Security Council, and here I want to share one perspective with members of the General Assembly. As President, I have received many invitations for trips. This has led me to travel to 28 countries, and in every single case without exception I have been faced with questions on the reform of the Security Council. That is a process that falls to Member States. I do want to share what I saw and heard outside this building. The work of the Security Council is a matter of life and death for too many people. The entire Organization is judged by it, and as we decide how to move forward the eyes of the world are watching us.

The fifth trend I want to highlight today is not a good one, because, frankly, I think that space for dialogue is closing and that to me is very worrying. The entire Organization was founded on dialogue and this very Hall was intended as a place where world Powers could talk through differences instead of taking them to the battlefield. Dialogue leads to results. That is why, in February, we watched a joint Korean team playing in the Winter Olympics. It is why peace has returned to Colombia after five decades of war, and it is why in January last year political turmoil in The Gambia did not turn violent. But for dialogue to work, it must be real.

I do not think we can generate real dialogue from shouting down the opposition, sticking to prepared scripts or repeating our own position again and again. We certainly cannot generate real dialogue by refusing to even engage in the first place. What would happen

if we all said that we would talk only to those who agree with us, or if we froze out anyone with different opinions, or if we put our hands over our ears and shouted louder? Well, there would be chaos. The Organization would become obsolete. Our differences would turn to animosity or even conflict, and overall we would get nowhere. Dialogue is part of our humanity. Maybe the current political climate has trained us to deliver monologues, but I think that our instincts for dialogue run deeper, and I hope they will prevail.

All of this leads me to the final trend I want to flag today, which is about multilateralism. Dialogue is how we interact, while multilateralism is who we interact with and what format we use. But again, the trend is not positive. Multilateralism is, I believe, under threat. We created this international system in 1945 as a direct response to the horrors of the Second World War. Unfortunately, some of its most fundamental principles are being eroded from beneath us. For example, over seven decades ago, we decided against exclusion, so we made the United Nations into what has become the most inclusive organization in the world, with 193 Member States. Now, however, we are seeing a return to the exclusive clubs of the past. A preference for bilateralism, or small alliances, is becoming dangerously common.

Also in 1945, we decided that a common set of rules should bind us all. Now, however, our rules-based system is under attack. Some seem willing to return to a world in which rules are set by those with the most power. We finally came to the realization after the Second World War that if every country pursued its own agenda, we all risked destruction, but that if, instead, we worked together, we could all move forward.

Now, however, we seem to have forgotten that. It is clear that we live in a complex, uncertain world. That is why it is so tempting to go it alone, to pull up our drawbridges, to wall ourselves in, to focus on our own defences and to let everyone else fend for themselves. Some of us are giving in to that temptation, but history tells us that this is not the way forward. It tells us that, actually, that could be the way back to a world we thought we would never see again. There is still time to counter this trend. I hope that we do not have to wait for disaster to teach us that multilateralism is the only way.

I think we are at a crossroads, and we need to make some tough choices. We can choose a better life for everyone or we can take the road of growing inequalities and broken promises. We can choose a

new approach for peace or we can take the road that will bring more human suffering. We can turn current trends into opportunities — from the movement of people to the advance of climate change — or we can turn down the wrong path and turn on each other instead of working together.

I think I will conclude here. I have many people to thank for their work over the past year — too many, in fact — so I am going to save that for my own time. Instead, I want to end by saying that it has been an honour and a privilege to serve as the President of the General Assembly and the representative of its members over the past year. This might be my last speech, but it will not be the last time the Assembly sees me. In fact, I will be back next week, sitting in one of those chairs.

I will end with a quote from Nelson Mandela. It comes from his final address to the General Assembly.

"I will continue to entertain the hope that there has emerged a cadre of leaders in my own country and region, on my continent and in the world, which will not allow that any should be denied their freedom, as we were; that any should be turned into refugees, as we were; that any should be condemned to go hungry, as we were; that any should be stripped of their human dignity, as we were." (A/53/PV.7, p. 16)

The stakes are high. We need to take the right road. To do that, we will need leadership. We will also need vision. I hope we will see both next week when our Heads of State and Government gather in this Hall. I wish members good luck for the seventy-third session and the years ahead for our United Nations.

The members of the General Assembly expressed their thanks to President Lajčák by acclamation.

The President: As we are now coming to the end of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly, I now invite representatives to stand and observe one minute of silent prayer or meditation, as is our custom.

The members of the General Assembly observed a minute of silent prayer or meditation.

The President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 70/305, of 13 September 2016, I now invite Her Excellency Ms. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President-elect of the General Assembly at its seventy-third session, to take the oath of office.

The President-elect (*spoke in Spanish*): I solemnly declare that I shall truthfully perform my duties and

exercise the functions entrusted to me as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations in all loyalty, discretion and conscience, and that I shall discharge these functions and regulate my conduct with the interest of the United Nations only in view and in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the code of ethics for the President of the General Assembly, without seeking or accepting any instruction in regard to the performance of my duties from any Government or other source external to the Organization.

Closure of the seventy-second session

The President: I would now like to invite the President-elect of the seventy-third session to meet me at the side of the rostrum for the handing over of the gavel.

I declare closed the seventy-second session of the General Assembly.

The meeting rose at 3.35 p.m.